

A CULTURAL ARTS CENTER FOR BOSTON CHINATOWN

by

WALTER K. W. KWAN

B.S.A.D. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
1979

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Degree of
Master of Architecture
at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
May 1980

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Signature of Author.....
Department of Architecture
May 9, 1980

Certified by.....
Timney F. Lee, Associate Professor
of Architecture and Urban Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by.....
Professor Maurice K. Smith, Chairman
Departmental Committee for Graduate Students

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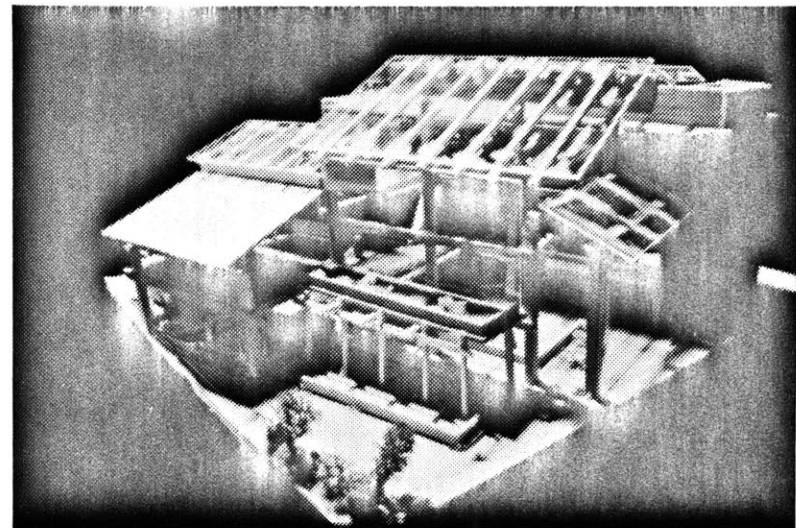
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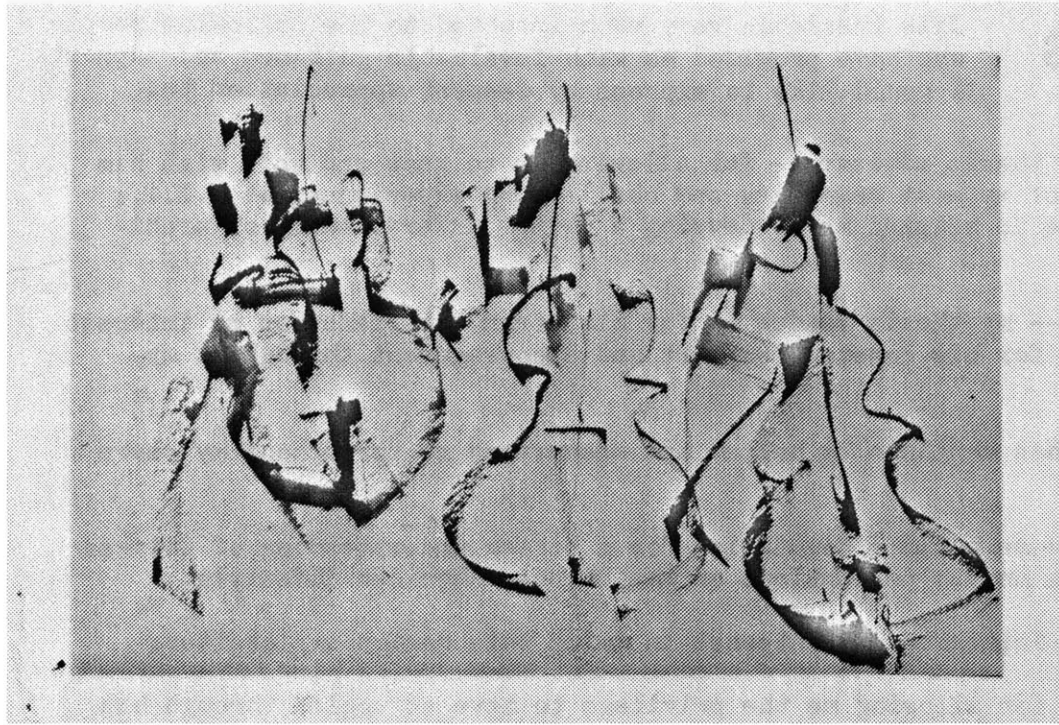
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Thesis Advisor: Tunney Lee
Thesis Readers: Nishan Bichajian
Robert Preusser
Thesis Coordinator: Maurice Smith

A Cultural Arts Center for Boston Chinatown

Walter K. Kwan





A Cultural Arts Center for Boston Chinatown

Walter K. Kwan

波士頓華埠文化藝術中心

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This thesis is dedicated to him.

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 9, 1980, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture.

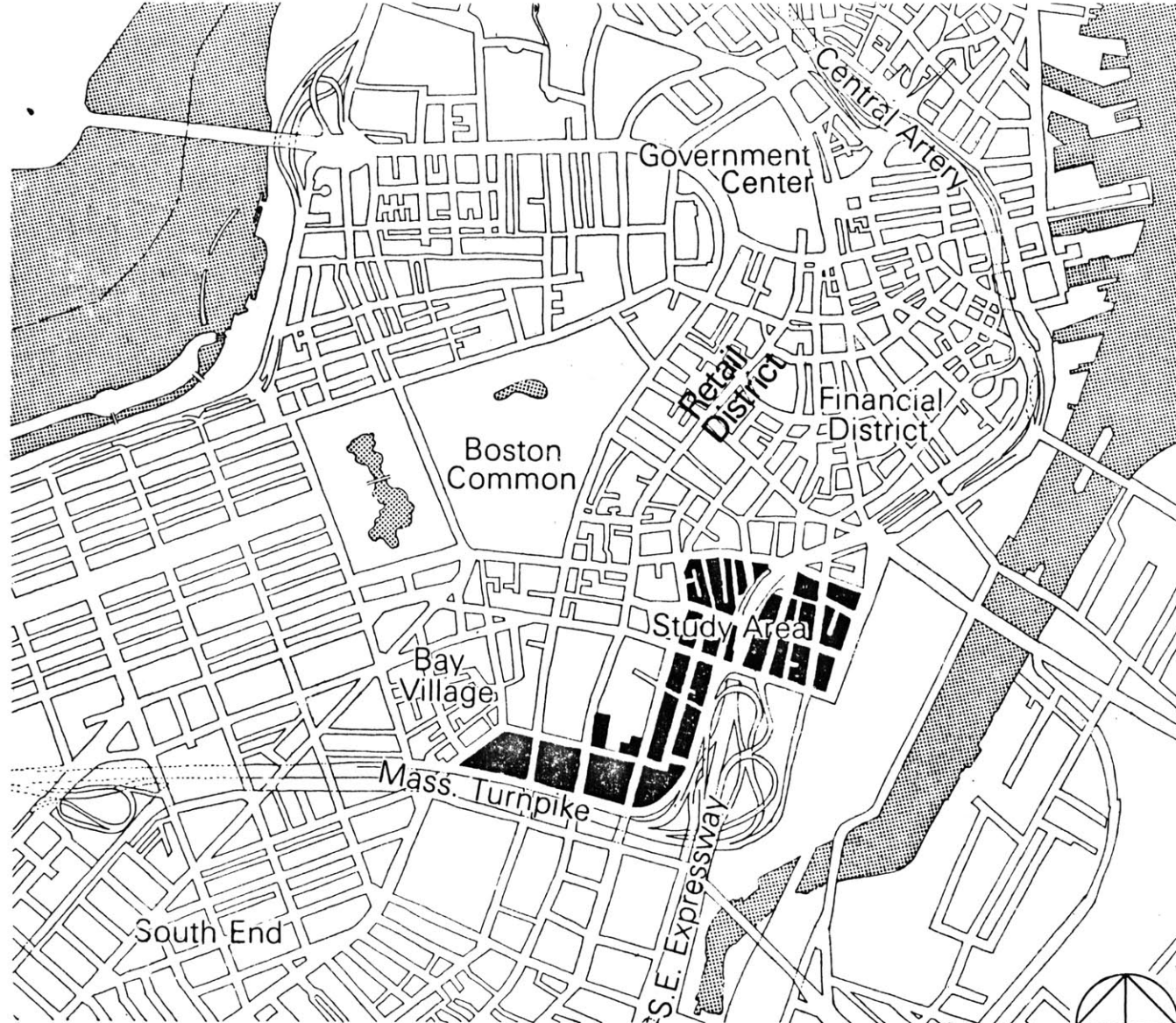
ABSTRACT

This thesis represents one Chinese-American architect's attempt to solve a design problem, namely that of designing for Boston Chinatown a cultural arts center that is not only functional, but aesthetically pleasing in its form as well as in its relation to its contextual surroundings in Chinatown. However, the thesis is by no means a comprehensive proposal to be actually implemented; rather, it is intended to be more of a formal design exploration, governed by the contextual references of Boston Chinatown and the Chinese community.

The first half of the thesis deals with the identification of the potential need for such a cultural arts center in Boston Chinatown, the examination of the specific contextual environmental characteristics, the selection of an appropriate site and the analysis of the relevant site factors, and finally the generation of design guidelines. From this foundation, a design for a cultural arts center -- which composes the second half of the thesis -- is presented.

Thesis Advisor: TUNNEY F. LEE

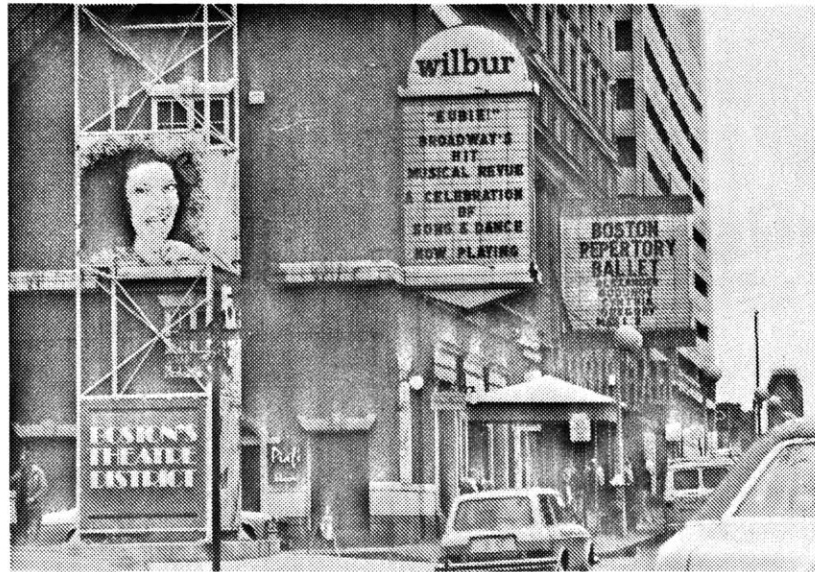
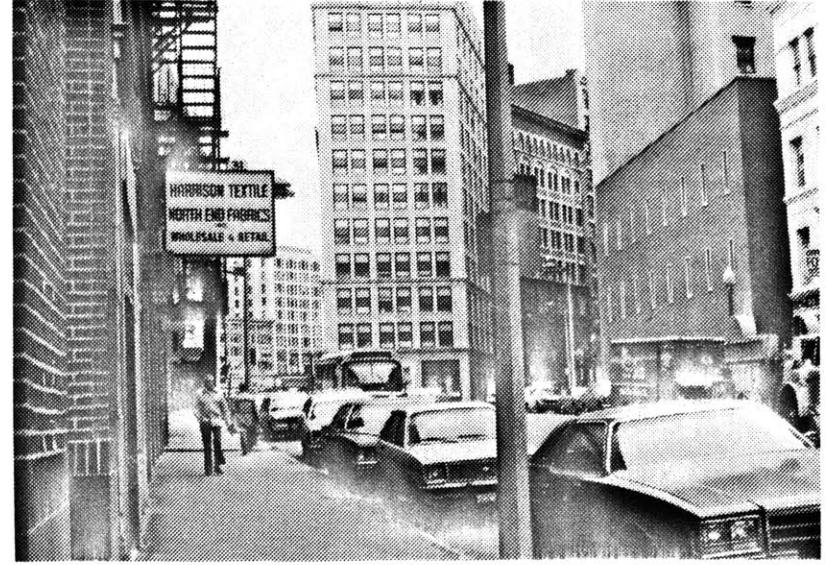
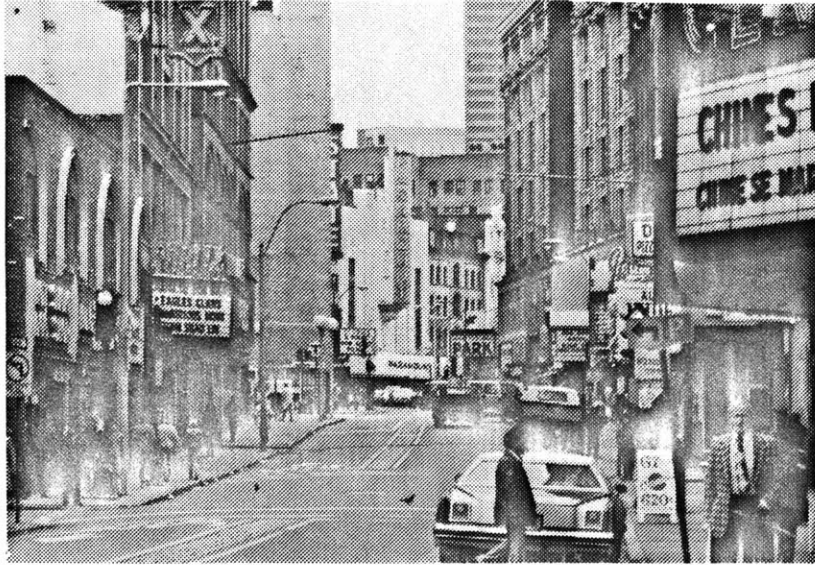
Title: Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Planning



Chinatown in Boston

Scale 0 500 1000





Introduction

Boston's Chinatown, the fourth largest "Chinatown" in the country, is not only the residence for the approximately 5,000 Chinese in the Chinatown-South Cove neighborhood but is also a gathering place and focal point for the Chinese community of all New England.

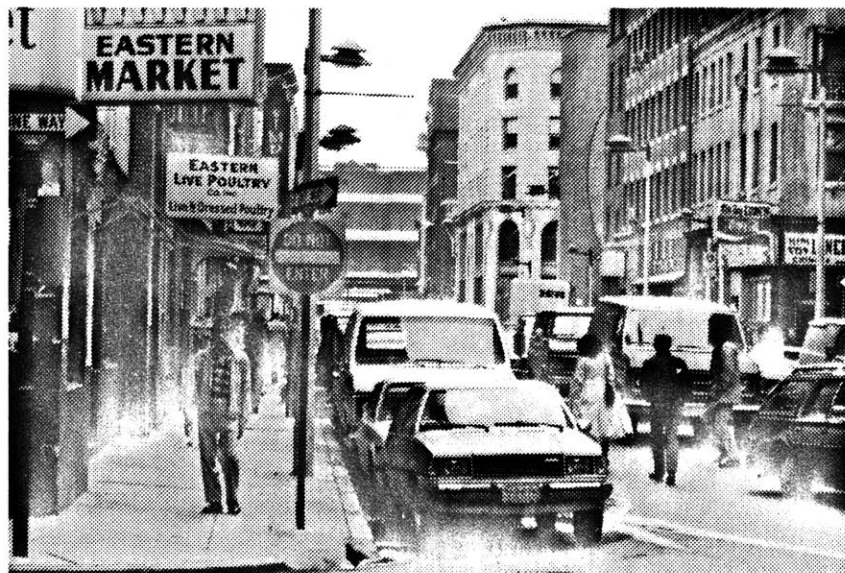
Due to cultural differences and language barriers that often exist, many Chinese have sought to settle in Chinatown or areas within easy reach in the proximity, in spite of the frequently poor living conditions, the over-crowding, and high rents. However, even those Chinese-Americans who live away from Chinatown usually still identify themselves as part of the Chinese community and maintain continuous ties with Chinatown through

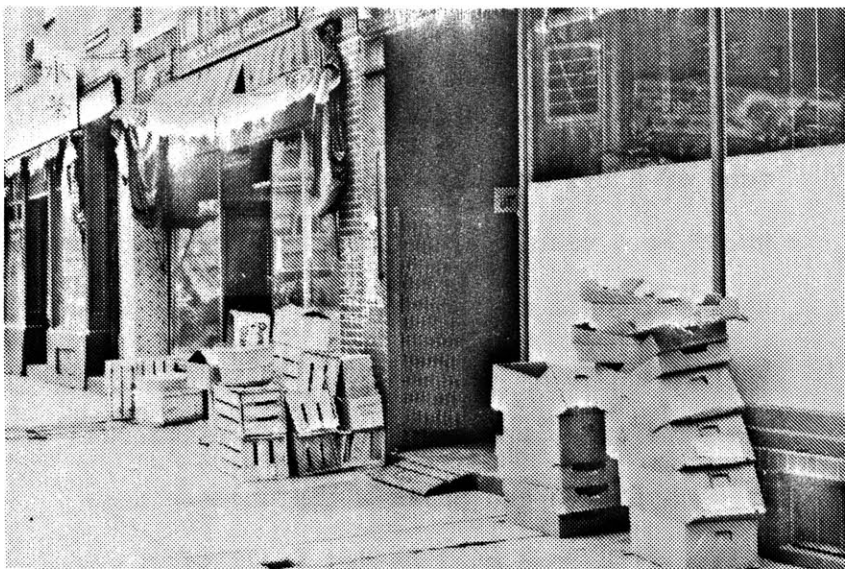
their social relations with friends and relatives, through their use of the retail and commercial facilities (e.g. the grocery stores and restaurants in Chinatown), and/or through their participation in such cultural activities as the celebration of Chinese New Years.

While the Chinese community is defined more by ethnicity than by geographic boundaries, Chinatown is clearly the cultural center of this dispersed community. However, there is presently no one focal place in Chinatown where all these people can gather (formally or informally) to participate in community events, to pursue and/or experience various aspects of their cultural heritage (especially artistic endeavors), or where they can go simply to relax (like a "home away from home").

To the non-Chinese, Chinatown represents

one of the parts of American life which offers a glimpse of a different heritage. Chinatown's unique character adds decidedly to the city's diversity, and this together with its location in the heart of Boston within close proximity to the central business district make Chinatown an important tourist attraction. However, at present, much of Chinatown's environmental quality is poor and its projected image is weak. Many area improvements are needed to enhance the physical environment of Chinatown and to strengthen Chinatown's links to its immediate neighbors and the rest of Boston. Some of these needed improvements include more access signs as to "Where's Chinatown", safer pedestrian connections to Chinatown (where people would not have to go through some poorly lit, deserted streets), improved lighting throughout the area, a more





workable garbage pick-up system, improved air and noise quality through Boston-wide actions, and more pocket parks within Chinatown.

Moreover, external pressures on Chinatown has not only continued but has recently picked up momentum; Boston Chinatown is presently facing the impacts of several planned and proposed developments around the area. Major development projects include Lafayette Place, a hotel/retail complex in the north, the South Station hotel/retail and office developments in the east, Tufts New England Medical Center and University expansions in the south, and in the west, the Theatre District's rehabilitation of Music Hall, and the State Transportation Building, a L-shaped, midrise office building with street-level shopping arcade and enclosed parking.

These developments have on one hand

brought Chinatown to bear some unprecedented development pressures which have been adversely affecting the community housing developments. On the other hand, however, these external investments could also represent substantial potentials for Chinatown's economic advancement since Chinatown depends mainly on the restaurant and grocery business to survive. It is crucial that the community devise strategies both to preserve the existing neighborhood community and to turn the external pressures in favor of economic advancement. Chinatown's economic life depends heavily on the tourist trade, yet the area projects a weak image. Especially in the face of such external pressures, it is vital for Chinatown to project a strong image and to establish a strong visual impression to draw people into Chinatown.



It is my proposition that the establishment of a cultural arts center in Chinatown would be a viable step toward satisfying Chinatown's goals to broaden its appeal to visitors and strengthen its economic base, and at the same time, preserve and enhance its cultural heritage and provide the Chinese community with some much needed facilities.



The central theme of my thesis is to generate a design for a cultural arts center in Boston Chinatown which will help to create a strong physical image that will improve, yet respect the physical environment as well as enhance the Chinese cultural spirits and serve as a sign that something is "happening" in Chinatown. In my projection, a cultural arts center can provide an environment which would offer the community members and visitors not only opportunities for recreation and relaxation, but also cultural enrichment and aesthetic enjoyment. The center would help initiate and encourage participation in Chinese cultural activities by providing facilities to house an auditorium, art gallery, some museum space, library, classrooms and workshops. The center would also provide some community recreation areas

and some open spaces now much lacking in Chinatown. In my design process, I intend this project to not merely serve as a symbolic theme for Chinatown's promotion, but that it be a catalyst for provoking in the community a stronger sense of pride and commitment toward revitalizing and improving the environmental quality of Boston Chinatown.



Since my thesis project is intended to be mainly a formal design exploration, I will focus on the physical and visual design aspects and will not try to resolve the many issues which would be involved in such a development, such as the economic feasibility of financing the project, the impact of relocation and displacement of current activity patterns, etc. My thesis proposal will assume the available use of my chosen site.

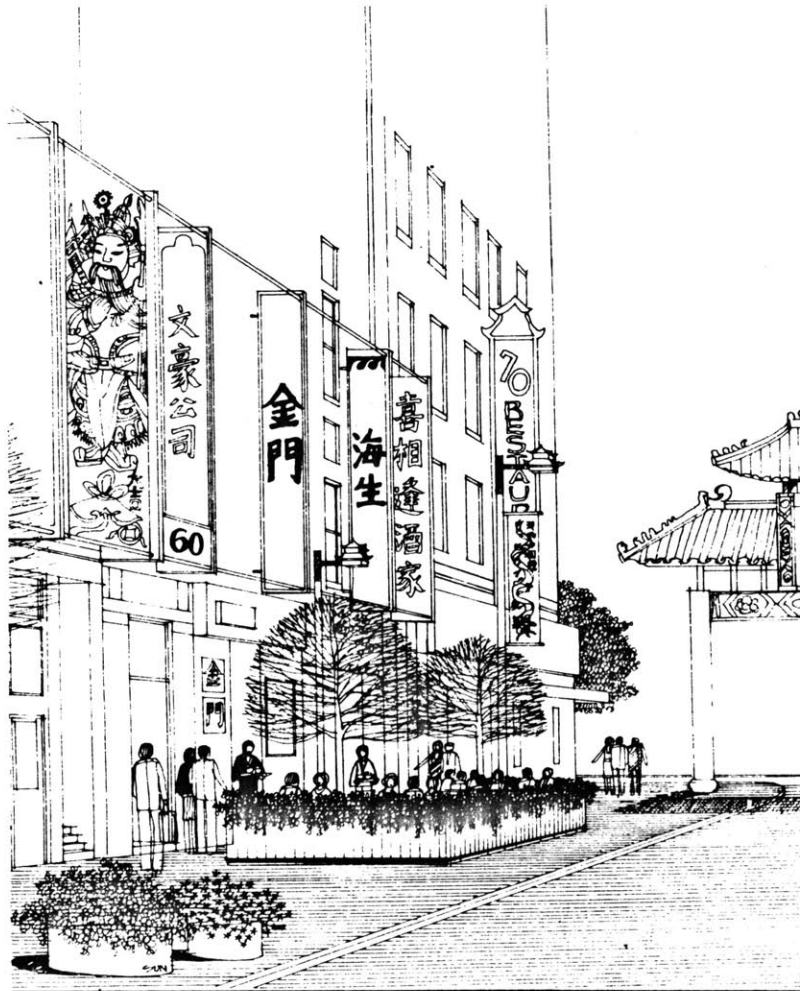
Present and Future Environment

- A- PARK PLAZA
- B- THEATRE DISTRICT
- C- TUFTS NEW ENGLAND MEDICAL CENTER
- D- WASHINGTON ST. RETAIL & THEATRE
- E- SOUTH STATION OFFICES



DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES

Chinatown of Tomorrow? A new look . . .



Does Boston Chinatown have a future? Will it survive as a strong commercial area which will continue to bring revenues and employment to this community?

As the Faneuil Hall and downtown Boston areas prosper, will Boston Chinatown have any chance for survival?

Architect and designer Paul Sun of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott, thinks so. Retained by the Chinese Economic Development Council (CEDC) as a consultant to design new storefront concepts for Boston Chinatown merchants, Paul Sun has developed some refreshing ideas to retain Chinatown's local character. He has ideas to uplift and to enhance the image of Boston Chinatown.

"The Chinese are street people, and activity on the streets is very Chinese," said Sun, who has traveled extensively through China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Sun believe that there are opportunities to beautify Chinatown, to make it more attractive, cleaner, more livable for its residents, and more economically viable for business.

The Chinese community and merchants, in particular, are invited to attend two public meetings to review and to discuss some of his ideas. Sun said he would like community input, interest and support for this project.

The meetings to unveil his ideas and to generate community discussion are scheduled for



Sampan

September 1979

Sunday, October 7, at 2 p.m. and on Wednesday, October 10, at 2:30 p.m. Both meetings will be held at the Merchants Auditorium at 20 Hudson Street. The meetings will be bilingual and the community is invited.

Elmer Leong, assistant director, Business Development, CEDC, said that the CEDC will be able to assist merchants in securing financing and a 20% rebate up to \$1,000 for storefront renovations through the Business Neighborhood Program of the City of Boston.

Environmental Characteristics

Chinatown refers to about ten small blocks of predominantly commercial and residential blocks in the core area along Beach Street occupying a little less than 20 acres of land. This area has a high concentration of Chinese restaurants, groceries, gift shops and other retail facilities. However, community facilities, especially those essential for families with children, such as open spaces, recreation grounds, schools, youth clubs, etc. are extremely deficient in Chinatown.

The street pattern of this area is small scale and irregular, and there are major traffic carriers crossing Chinatown which produce local noise and pollution problems. The core of Chinatown is a dense mixture of

small scale brick buildings, four to seven story warehouses, and older medium-rise office blocks. The prototype of Chinatown buildings consists of commercial space on the first floor and walk-up apartments on upper floors. Many of these buildings are in somewhat dilapidated conditions, and the physical environment of Chinatown is in general in need of much improvement.

The most active and distinctly Chinese parts of the core extend from the intersection of Beach and Tyler Streets east-west along Beach, and southward down Tyler and Hudson Streets. This area remains well lit into the night, illuminated by red and gold neon signs and pagoda-style street lights. During the day, this area is crowded with workers waiting on the street corners to be picked up and driven to work at the suburban

Chinese restaurants, and with patrons of the various Chinatown restaurants and food stores. Beach Street is the commercial spine of Chinatown's core, and the construction of the proposed "China Gate" (a gift to the community from Taiwan) over the mouth of Beach Street will further identify this section as the main gateway into Chinatown.

However, Chinatown's links to its immediate neighbors and the rest of Boston are generally weak. There is a well developed transportation system at the edge of the core, both for local and intercity links, and Chinatown is within walking distances of the city's central commercial and entertainment districts, but Chinatown does not project a strong impression at these points of potential contact with the non-Chinese population. For example, there are not enough access signs to direct

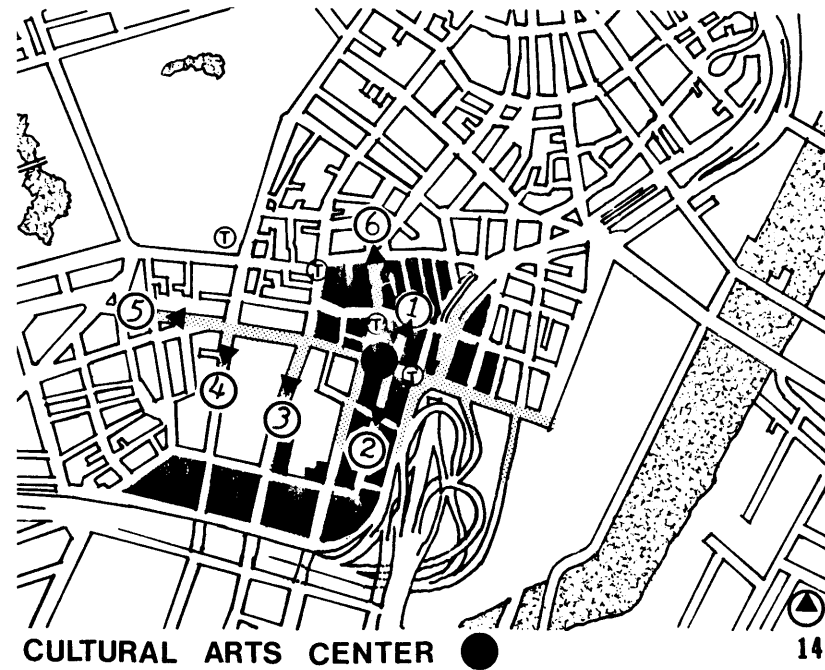
visitors to Chinatown; pedestrian connections to Chinatown often go through some poorly lit, deserted streets, where pedestrians would begin to worry about their safety after dark.

Moreover, development of the various downtown projects would in the future years generate additional demand for various kinds of services and increase the business volumes in Chinatown. Promotion of the retail business, tourism, entertainment activities would be compatible to and enhance Chinatown's commercial development goals.



Site

- 1- TO TRADITIONAL CENTER OF CHINATOWN
- 2- TO TAI TUNG VILLAGE
- 3- TO TUFTS N.E. MEDICAL CENTER
- 4- TO THEATRE DISTRICT
- 5- TO PARK PLAZA
- 6- TO WASHINGTON ST. RETAIL AND THEATRES



The site I have chosen for my thesis design exploration is the "Harrison-Tyler Site", which was studied and named by the M.I.T. Total Studio two years ago as part of a report for the Chinese Economic Development Council concerning the land and economic development possibilities in Boston Chinatown.

Bounded by Tyler and Kneeland Streets and Harrison Avenue, the site is a vital component of the overall Chinatown development plan. It is right next to Beach Street -- the focal point of Chinatown, where many of Boston's Chinese do their shopping and where workers in suburban restaurants wait to be picked up. More importantly, the site is located on Kneeland Street, one of the four main "corners" where Chinatown meets the rest of the city. It is crucial that a strong impression be made here. At these points,

visual contact with Chinatown should be powerful so as to draw people into Chinatown. Considering the increased pedestrian and vehicular arrivals that would result from the Park Plaza development, the Theater District rehabilitation and other area-wide improvements, the Kneeland Street edge might become a potential gateway to Chinatown (in addition to the Beach Street gateway).



The study site is presently occupied by a parking lot, and some properties south of the parking lot to be referred to as the "Kneeland properties", which consist of deteriorated four-to-five story brick structures, stepping down to a run-down two-level commercial building strip fronting Kneeland Street. The "Harrison-Tyler Site" presently constitutes extremely low land utilization of potentially valuable land and inhibits economic revitalization of the Chinatown areas.

My design proposal will assume the use of the whole "Harrison-Tyler Site" and the clearance of the "Kneeland properties" for the following reasons:

- the site is a prominent location within Chinatown.
- the existing buildings are in poor condition.

--the Kneeland edge is a potential new gateway into Chinatown.

The site evaluated in regard to its location, size, access, availability and other criteria, is an ideal location for mixed development with emphasis on facilities for the arts. The site has many strengths to help Chinatown build a stronger visual impression. Aesthetically, a cultural arts center here will create an area of great interest, and economically, it will complement a downtown area, which is and will be more predominantly commercial. A cultural arts center on this site will have the advantage of being on the doorstep of Boston's commercial cross roads without being in the path of commercial expansion.



▲ PHOTO OF SITE LOOKING TOWARD HARRISON AVE.



▲ PHOTO OF SITE LOOKING TOWARD TYLER ST.



▲ KNEELAND ST. LOOKING TOWARD THEATRE DIST.



SITE MAP

Design Process

The design of this thesis project was developed in two general stages. During the first phase of design development, I concentrated on the general physical projections of the whole "Harrison-Tyler Site" with my major attention focused on the pedestrian circulation through the site, the massing, and the scale of the proposed complex. This is a schematic study of the physical implications of the mix-use complex of a cultural arts center. After providing a workable land and physical development strategy for the site, I focused my attention on a more detailed design exploration. Throughout the design phases, I tried to synthesize my interests in architecture and visual arts. I used

simultaneously such design tools as photography, drawing, and model building to present the image of my design, and to study the qualities of spaces, the use of light and color and symbol and signage, and to see how all these can add visual excitement to our living environment.

The design capitalizes on the prominent location of the Kneeland Street edge as a potential "gateway" into Chinatown, and proposes to create on this highly visible site, a cultural arts center -- a development that has cultural significance to reinforce the Chinese atmosphere of the community and to identify the area for the passers-by. The projected image of the cultural arts center complex should be highly visible, colorful, and will contain an auditorium, gallery space, a community lounge with some recreational use,

workshops and studios, an interior courtyard, a sidewalk cafe and some commercial spaces. The resulting design should be an exciting gathering place for both the residents of Chinatown and the visitors to the area.

It is important that the physical design of the cultural arts center be responsive to the chaotic, heterogeneous character which seems to be a key part of the image of this and other Chinatowns. In other words, the center should be designed to preserve and extend the richness of the extremely varied and complex visual patterns which are part of the essence of the area. The goal is to bring a level of continuity and sense of place to the developing site by interrelating the physical design, auto and pedestrian circulations, open space configurations and activity patterns of the development.



In the process of developing my design, I have generated a few general guidelines to follow:

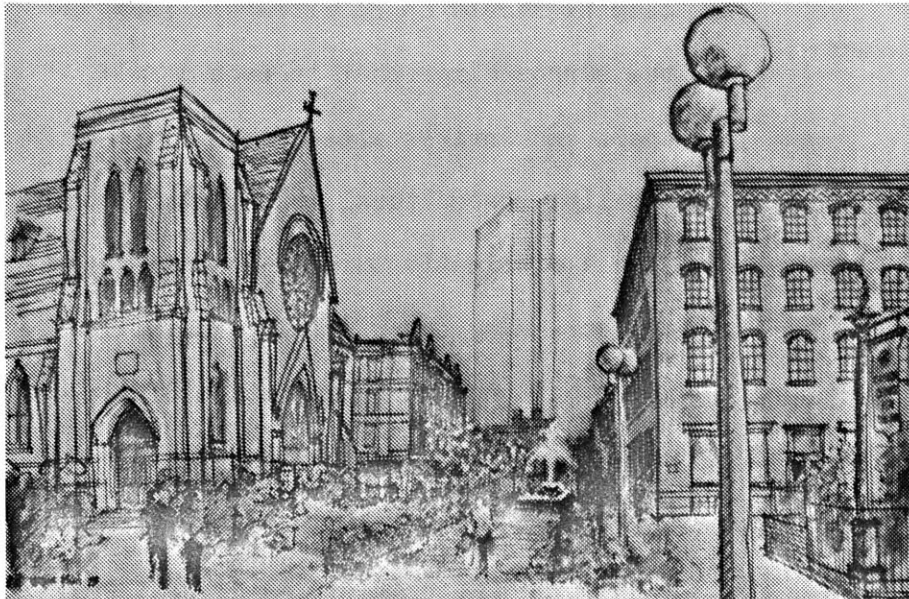
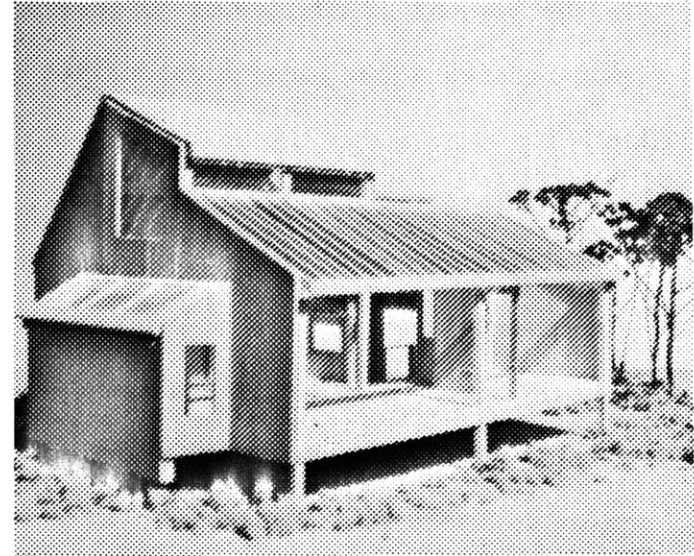
- The pedestrian circulation through the site should link the traditional commercial center of the core (the Beach Street area) with the new development on the Harrison-Tyler Site.
- The cultural arts center complex should have a relatively open inviting look.
- The highest elements of the proposed arts center should be concentrated to the north end of the site, as close to the warehouse as possible, so as to minimize the casting of shadows onto the roof of the rest of the development.
- The roof should be designed so as to allow the penetration of natural light to illuminate the circulation routes

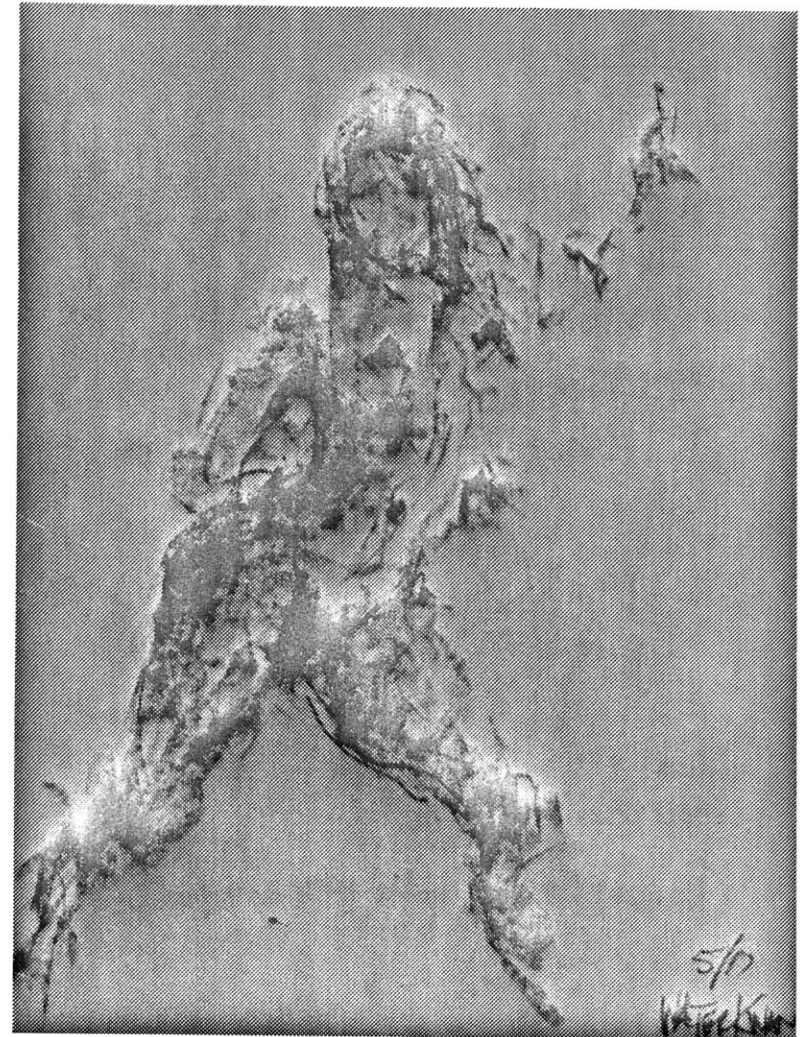
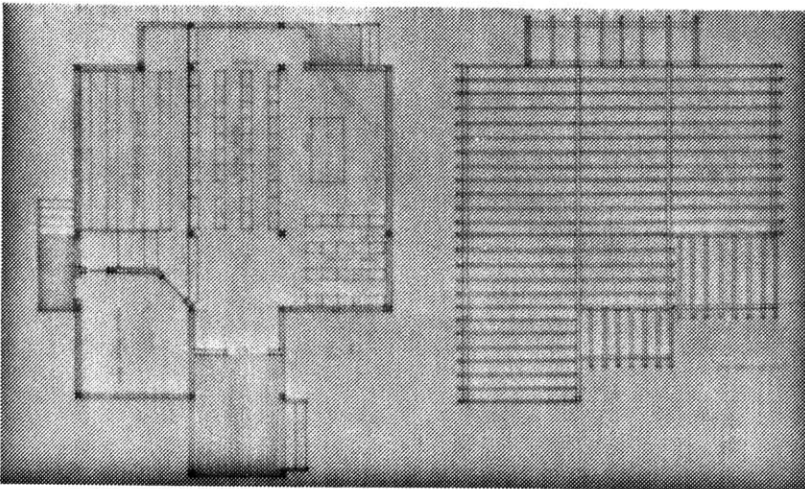
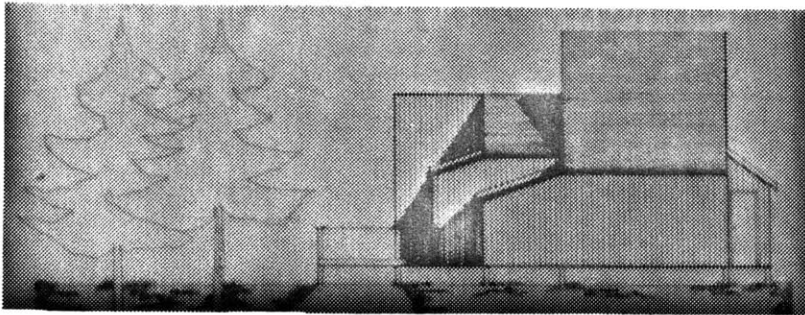
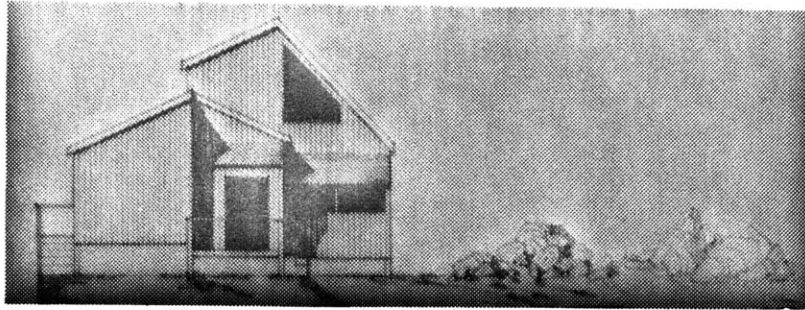
and accent the textures and colors within the complex. The interior courtyard would be illuminated mostly by skylight from the roof.

- The whole complex should be so proportionated to avoid overpowering the distinctive scale of the surrounding streets.
- Yet, the formal projection of the complex should be so different from the surroundings that it sets itself apart and invites attention.
- Finally, the cultural arts center should have a distinctly Chinese essence without appearing superficial. The building should not be an imitation of traditional Chinese architectural prototypes, but rather should be a reflection of the Chinese-American lifestyle today.

Integration of Design Tools

Drawing, model building, and photography are integrated as a way to both generate and communicate my design solution.



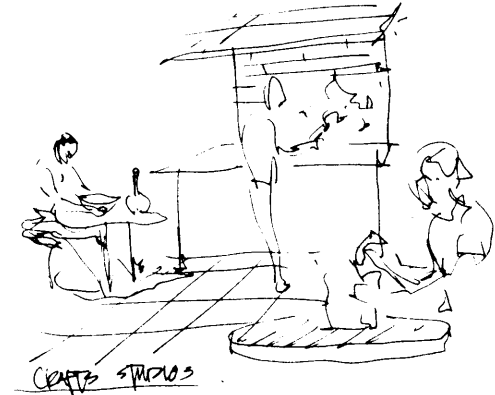




- EXHIBITION GALLERY
- provide a setting that is stimulating to observe
 - heightens effect of exhibit - ideal illumination
 - a variety of experience for observer
 - flexibility & provide supporting role of function



- ART STUDIOS
- provide facilities for instruction
 - space should be flexible & can vary with need
 - accessible both from outside area & exhibition space
 - simple storage space & work surfaces



Crafts Studios



Concert Rooms



- ART LIBRARY
- for the use of the public & the staff
 - adequate facility for research & study purpose
 - storage for slides, photos & prints



- CHILDREN'S GALLERY
- provide for supervised observation & creative learning
 - created to be easily accessible 2/24!

- Kennedy School's central space as reference.

Program

The program for the cultural arts center is generated through discussions with the coordinator of the Asian American Resource Workshop and with other members of the Chinese community. This program is basically utilized to give some sense of space and activity into a physical projection of a cultural arts center.

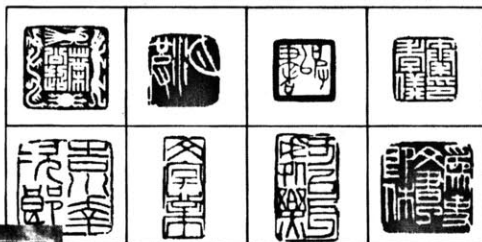


SPACE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE CULTURAL ARTS CENTER

Exhibition & museum spaces -----	2000 sq.ft.
Small library -----	1500 sq.ft.
Auditorium (150-200 people) for multi-purpose uses -----	1500 sq.ft.
Lecture/meeting space (100 people) -----	1200 sq.ft.
Community workshops & studios -----	5000 sq.ft.
Community lounge for reading & recreation -----	1200 sq.ft.
Commercial spaces for small shops & a cafe -----	1000 sq.ft.
Administration uses -----	800 sq.ft.
Open spaces & interior courtyard -----	6000 sq.ft.
Restrooms -----	700 sq.ft.
<hr/>	
Total	2,0900 sq.ft.

BEAUTIFUL CHINA
A People's Republic

中華人民共和國



China's chromatic flute (sheng) and piccolo (pipa)



Tai-chi (Tai-chi) (a form of drum fiddle)



中華文物

中華人民共和國



Ivory-carved Goddess of Mercy with Gems, Ming Dynasty (1368-1643)

A woman with a basket, jade, Ching (1644-1911)

Image of Tang Dynasty

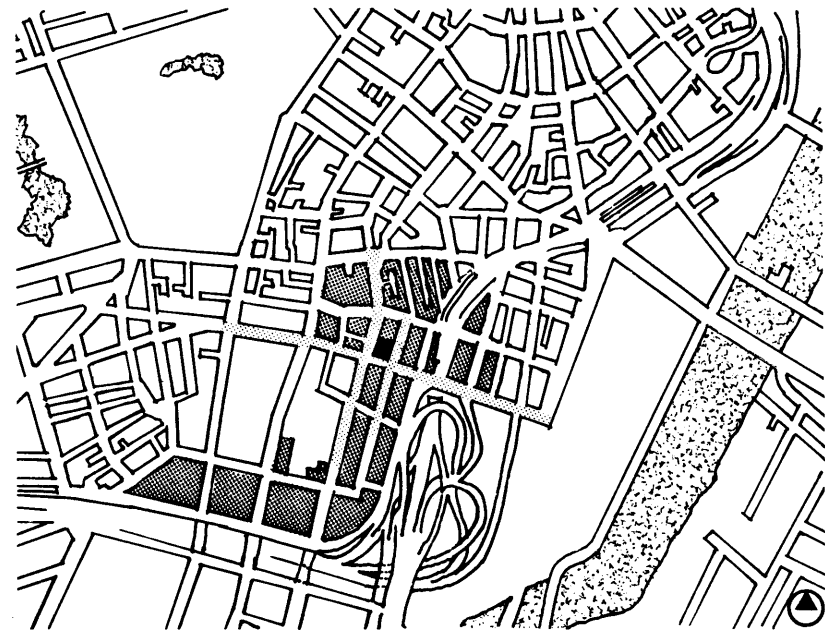
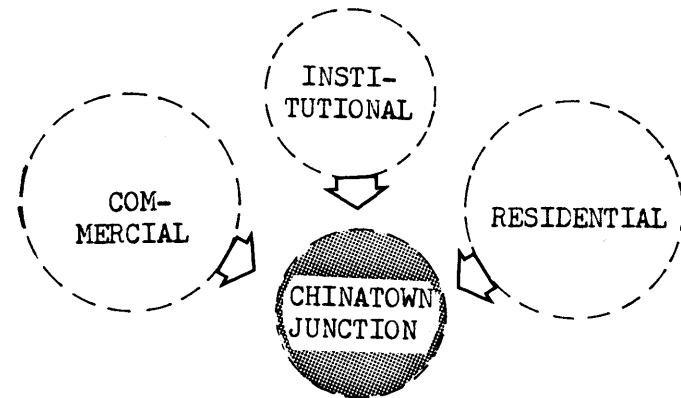


Vase with golden design upon blue background, Ching Dynasty (1644-1911)

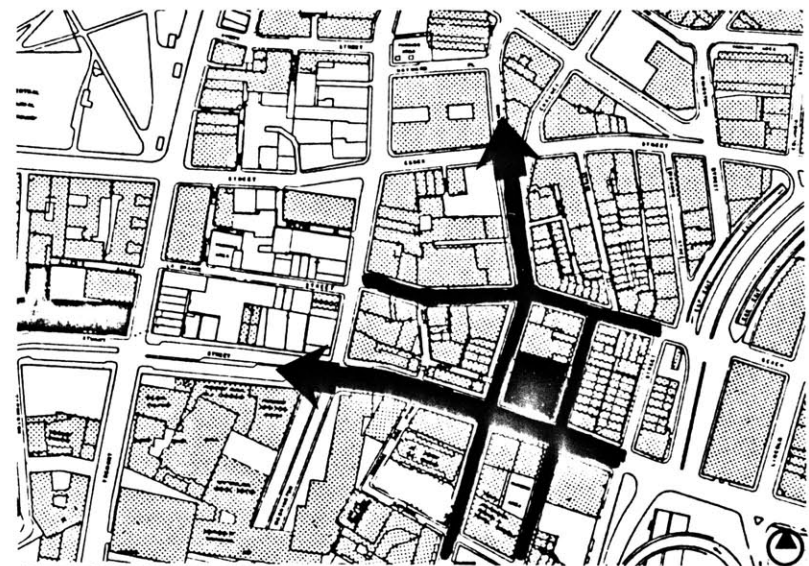
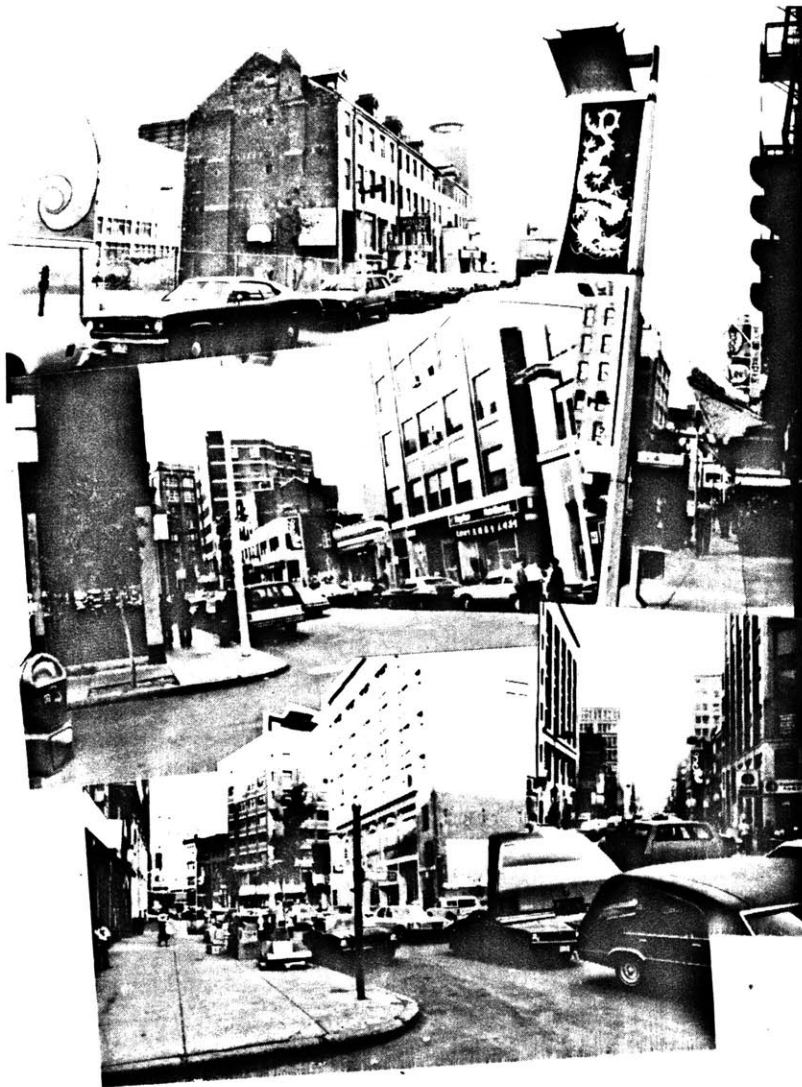


Bronze mirror (Han dynasty)

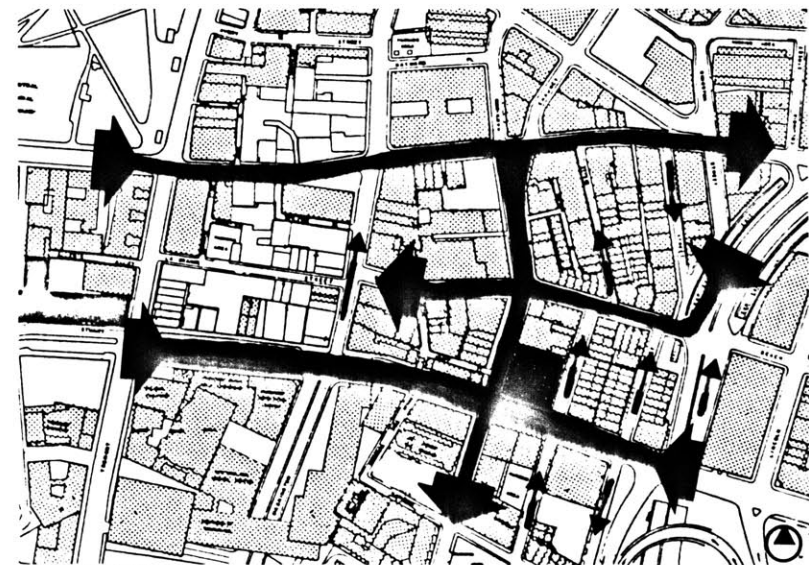
A Cultural Arts Center/ Presentation



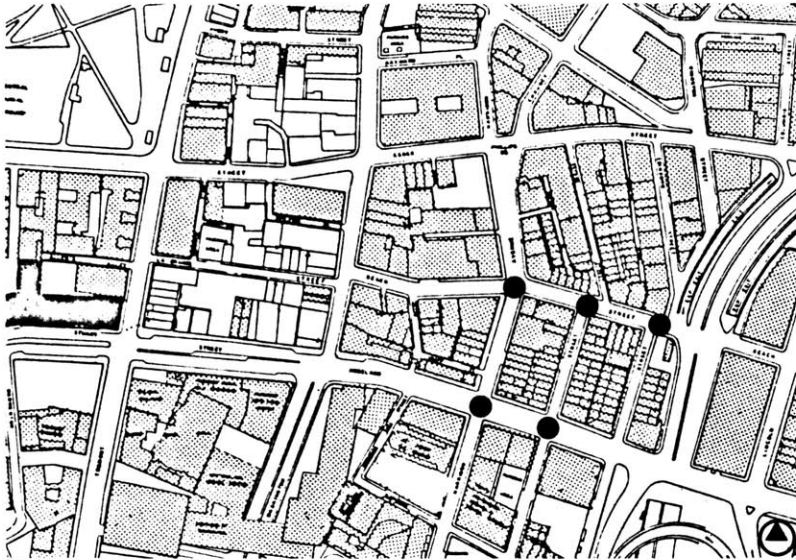
SITE ANALYSIS



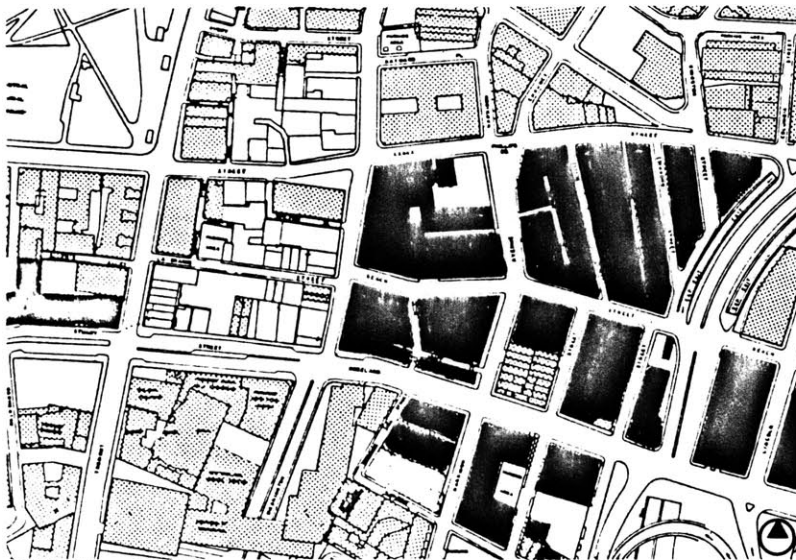
PEDESTRIAN MOVEMENT



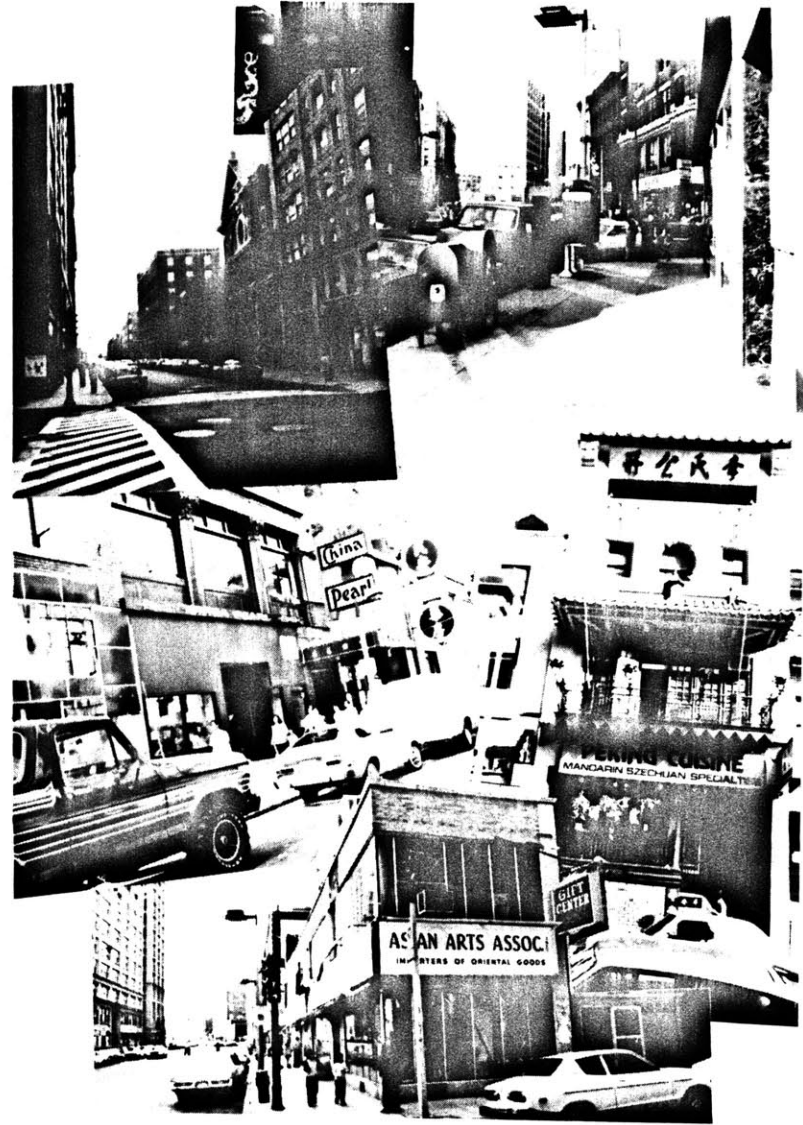
TRAFFIC

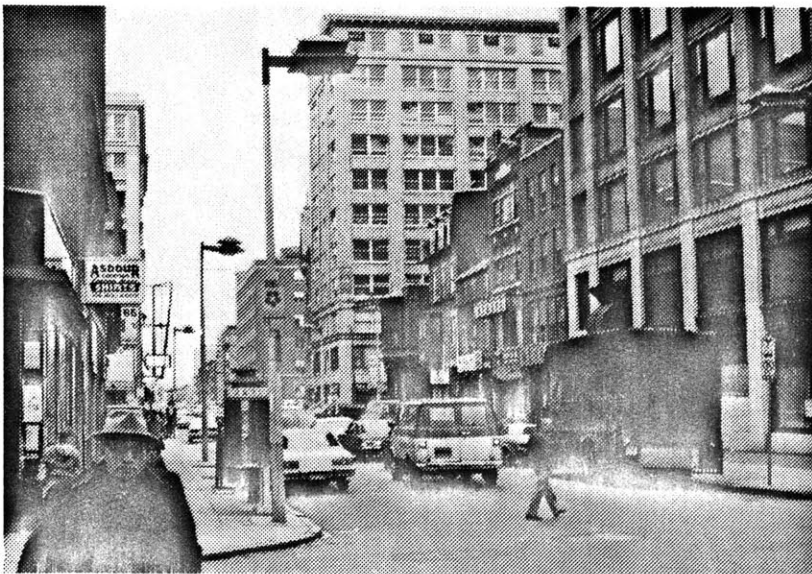


CRITICAL NODES ●

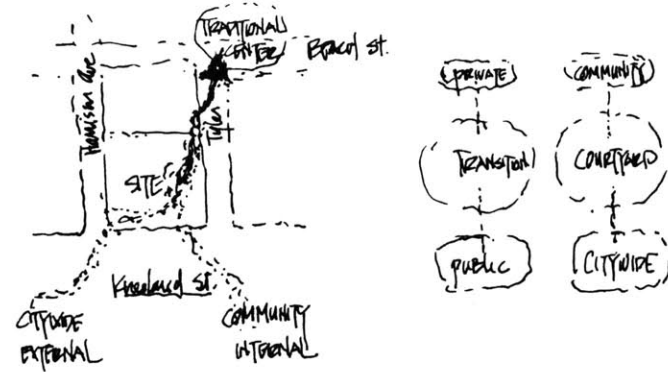


SOLID / VOID

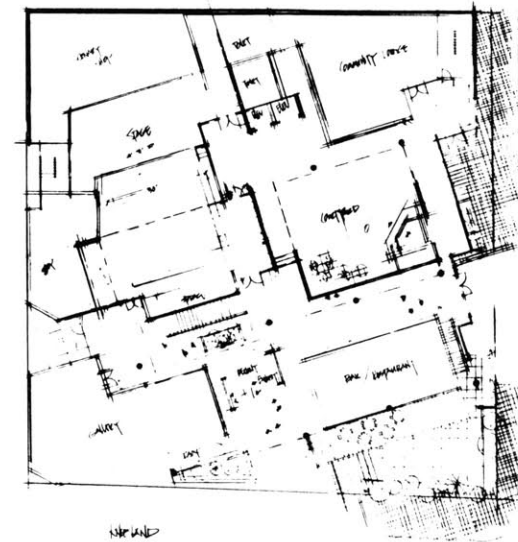
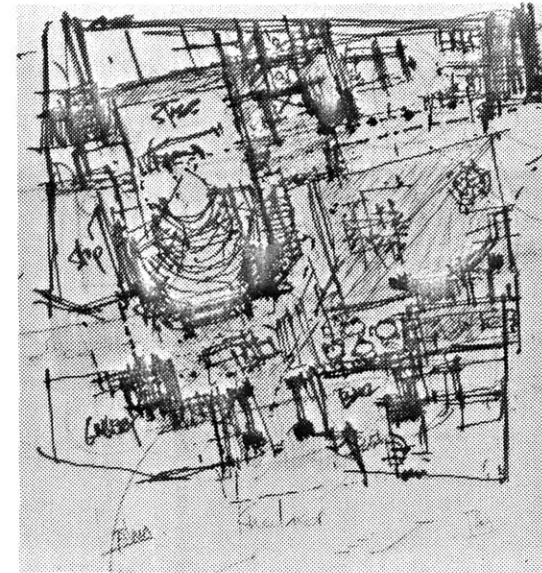




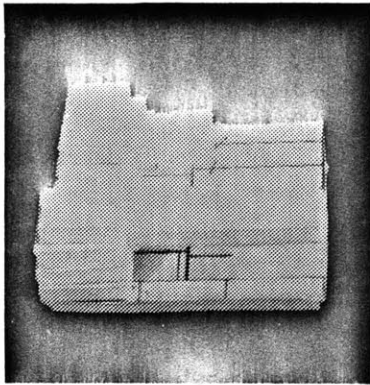
DESIGN CONCEPTS



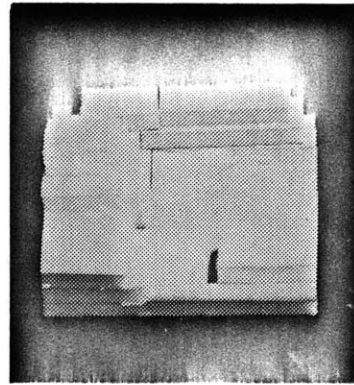
landscape painting as metaphor — rocks, tiered perspective



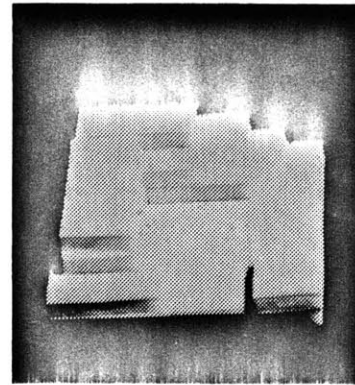
FORMAL PROJECTIONS



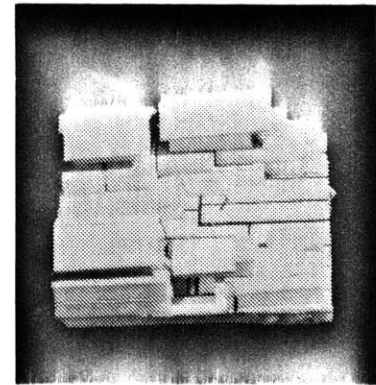
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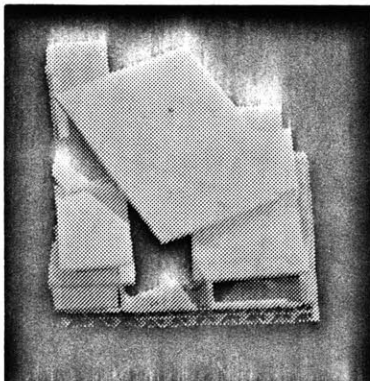
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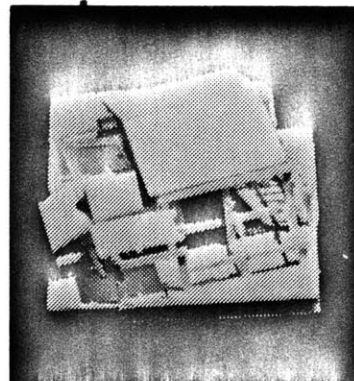
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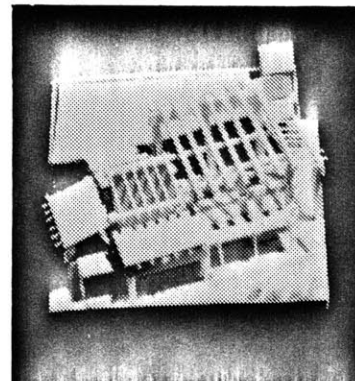
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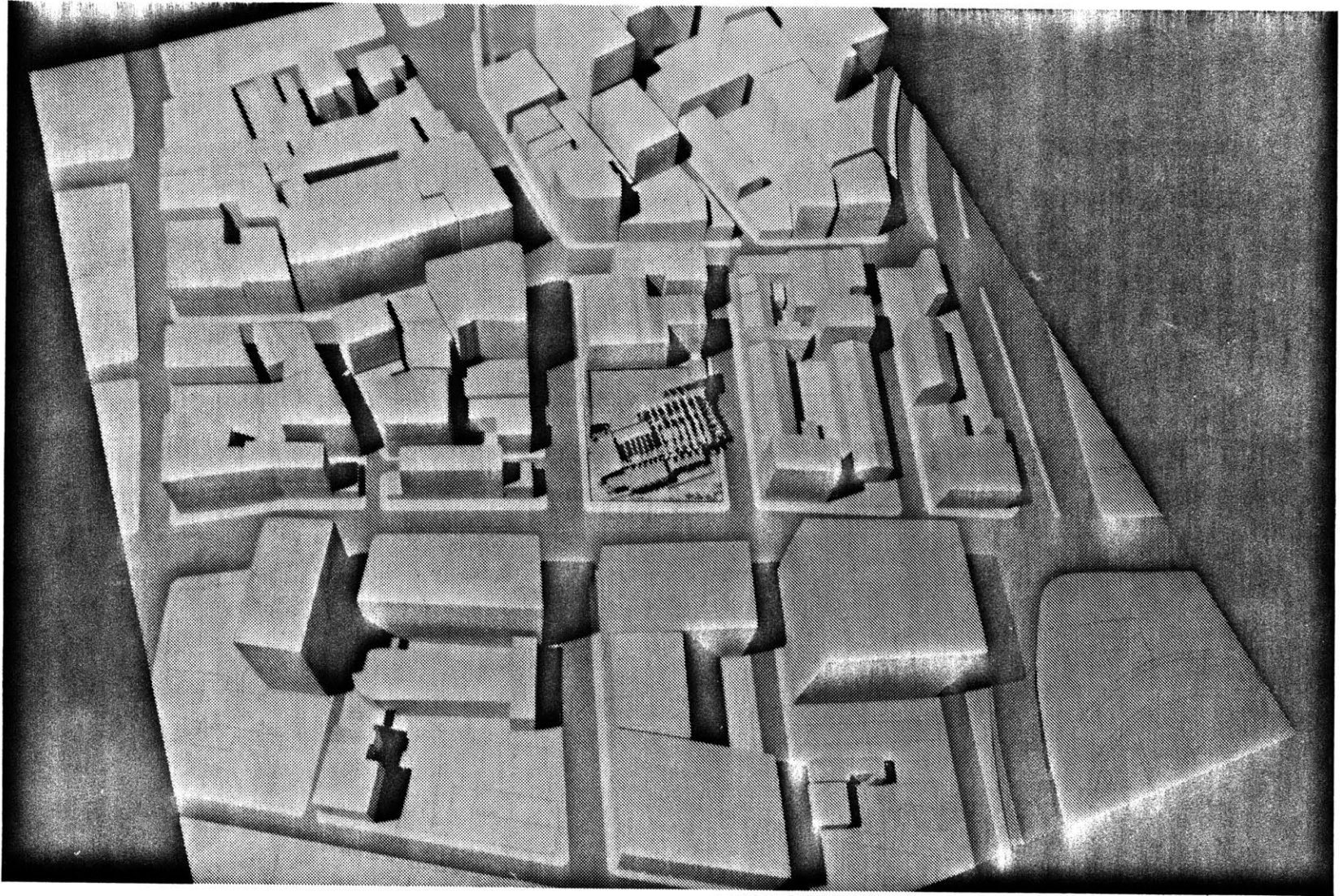


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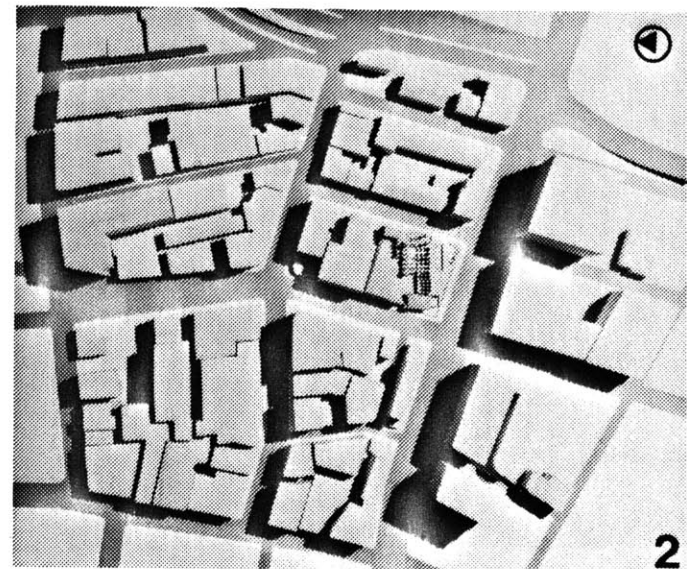
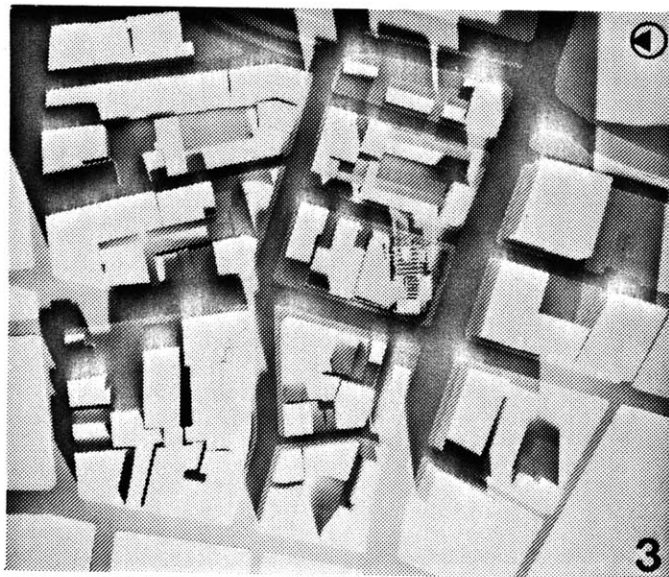
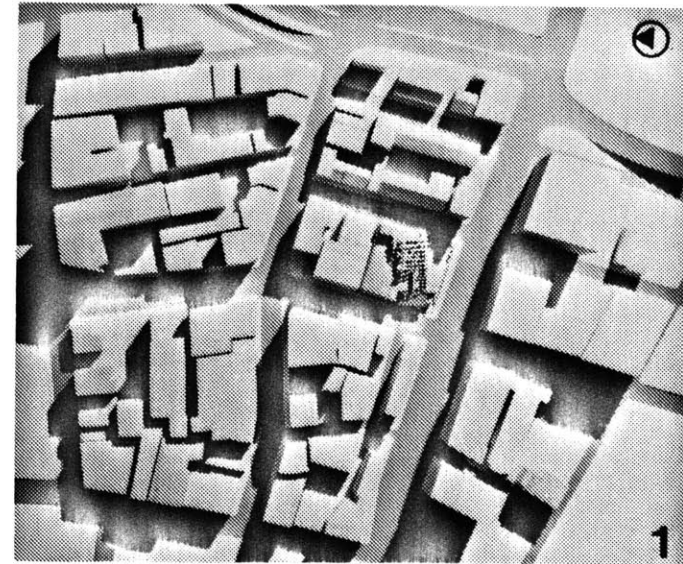
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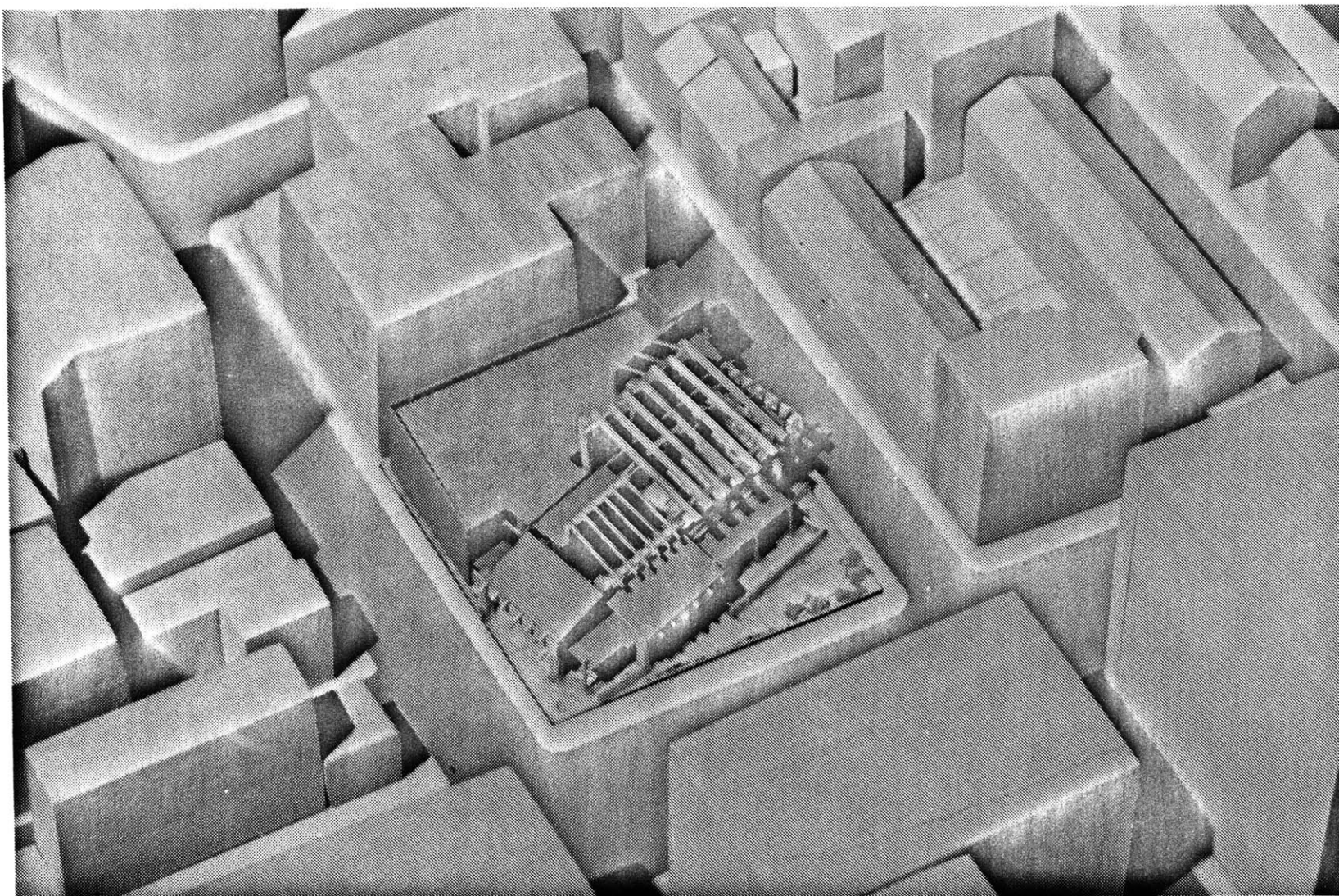
SITE MODEL



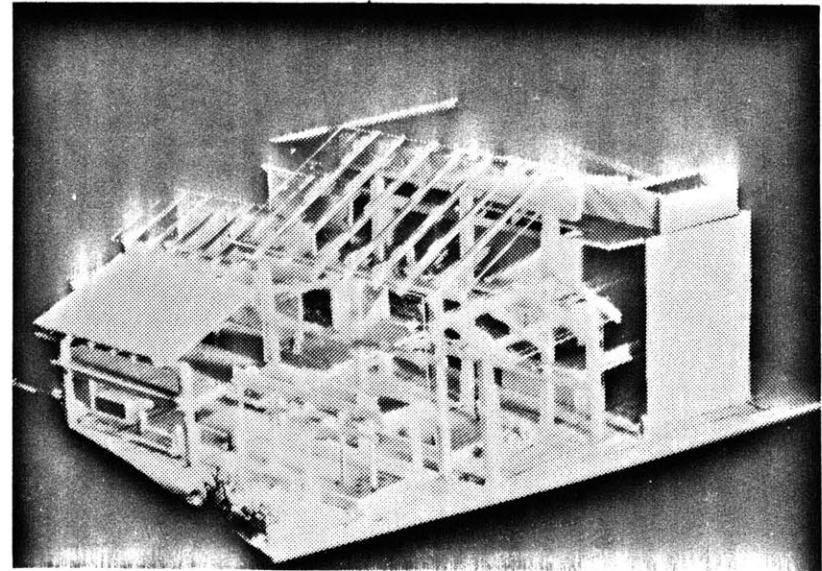
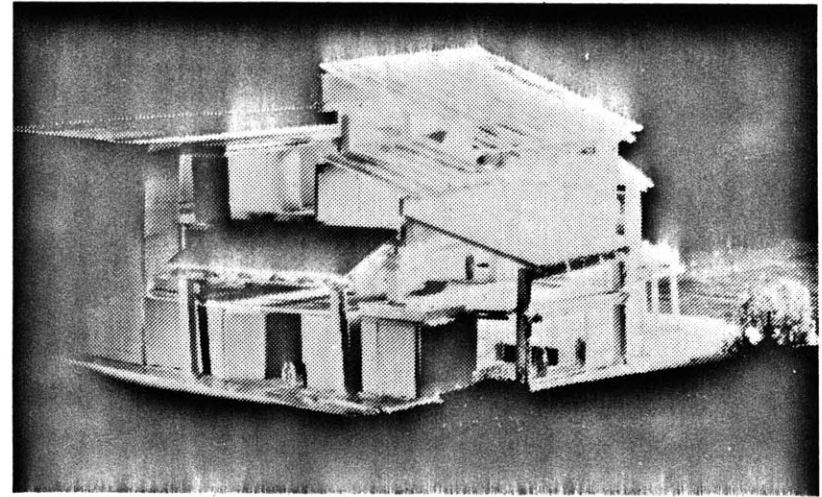
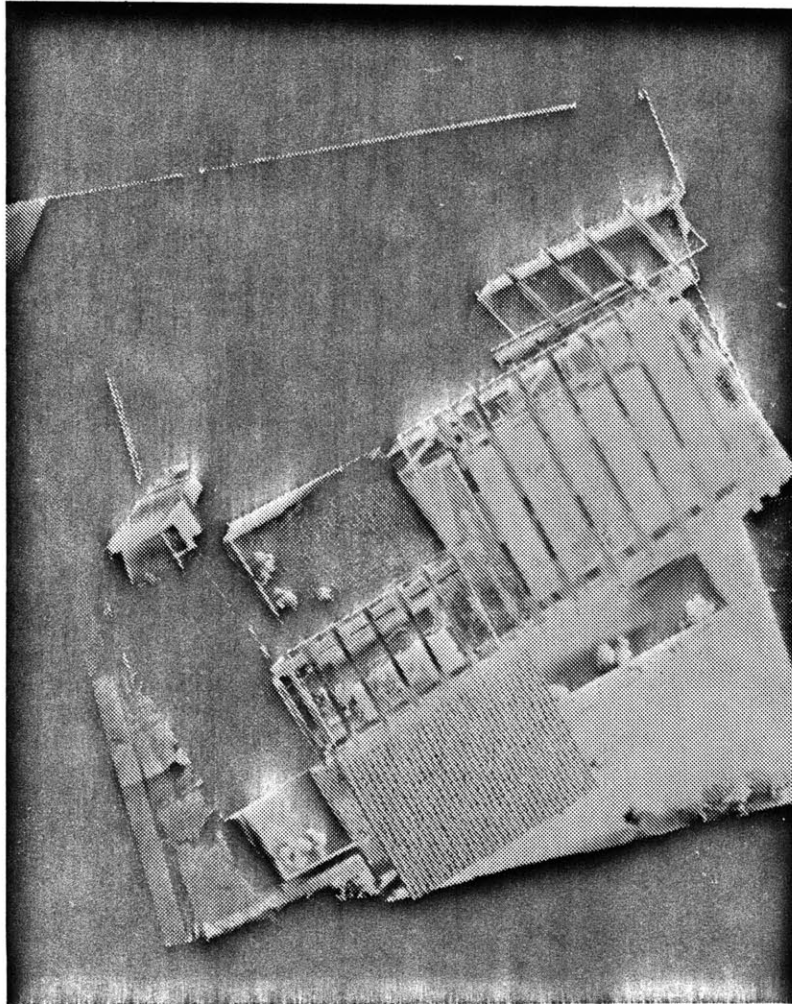
LIGHT CONDITIONS

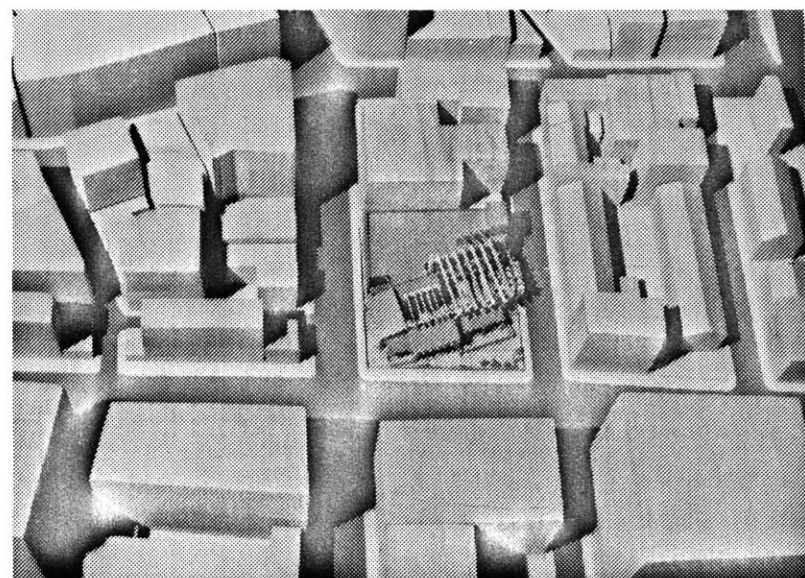
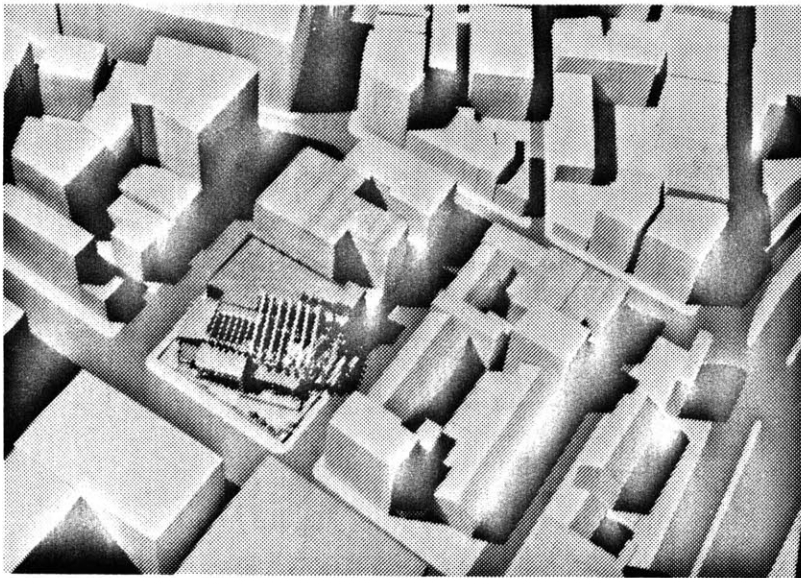
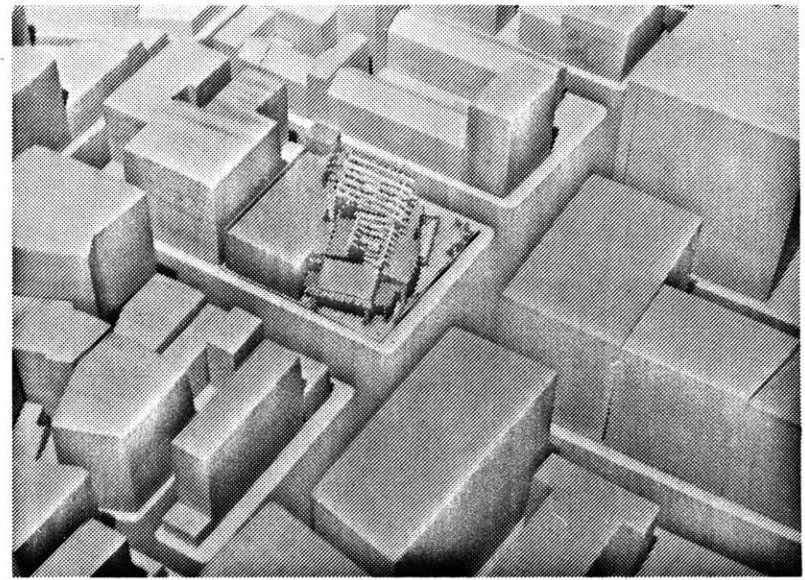
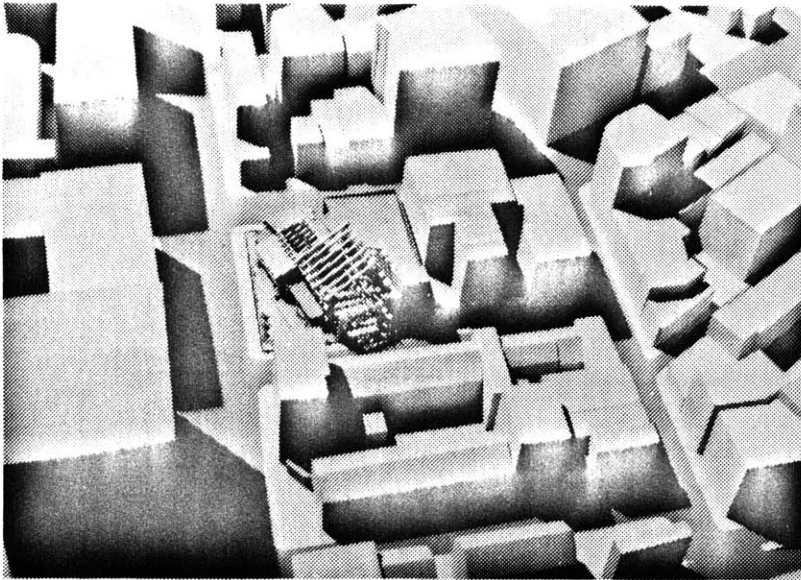
- 1- LIGHT FROM EAST
- 2- LIGHT FROM SOUTH
- 3- LIGHT FROM WEST



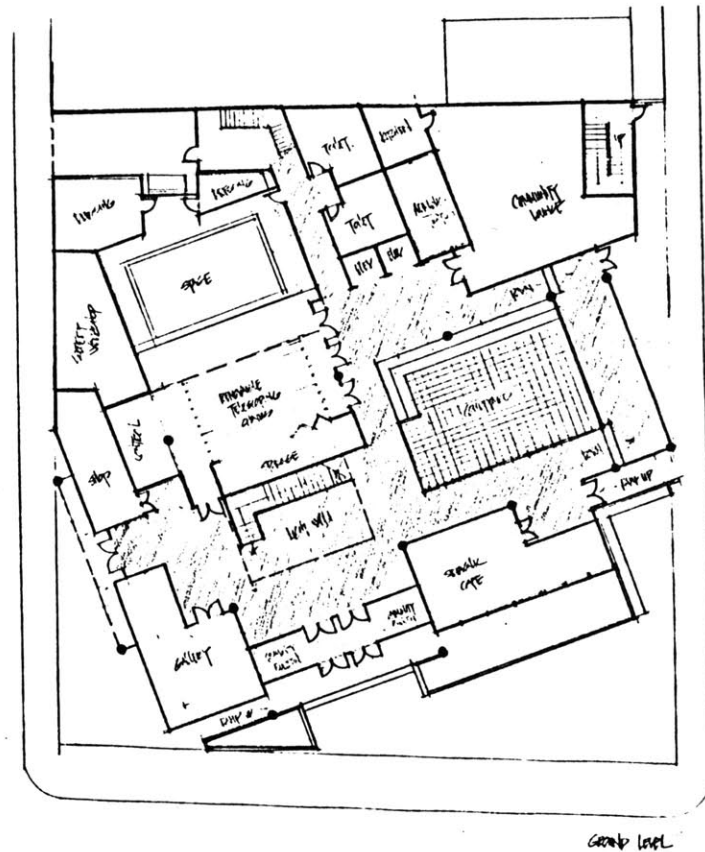
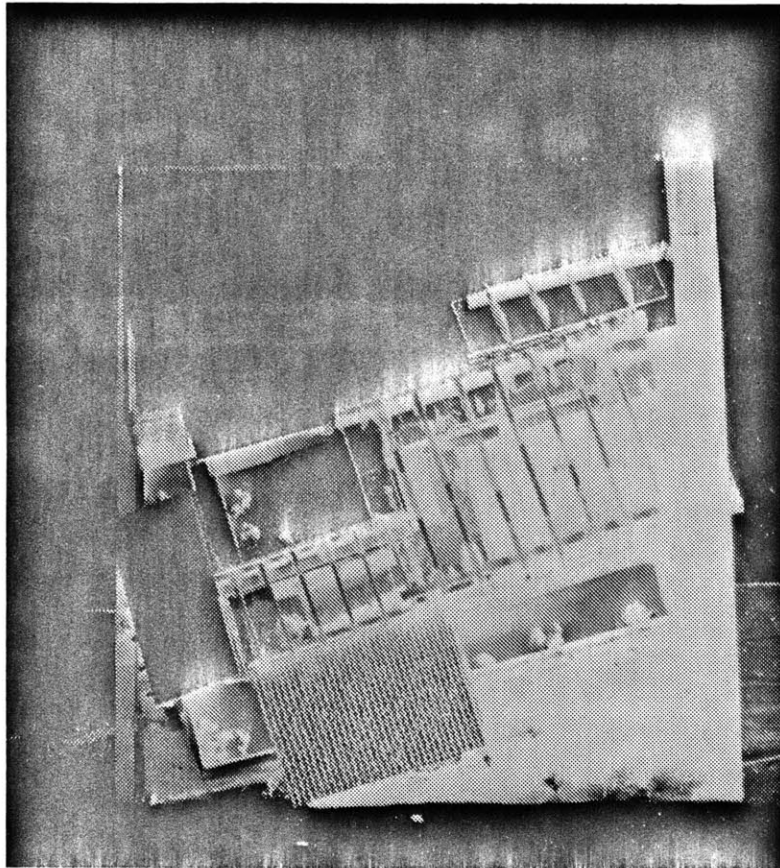


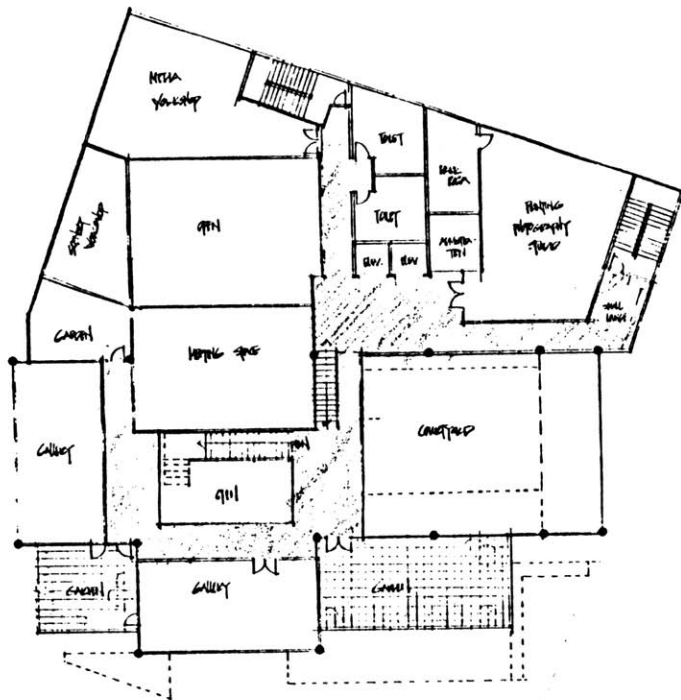
BUILDING ORIENTATION & RELATIONSHIP TO SITE



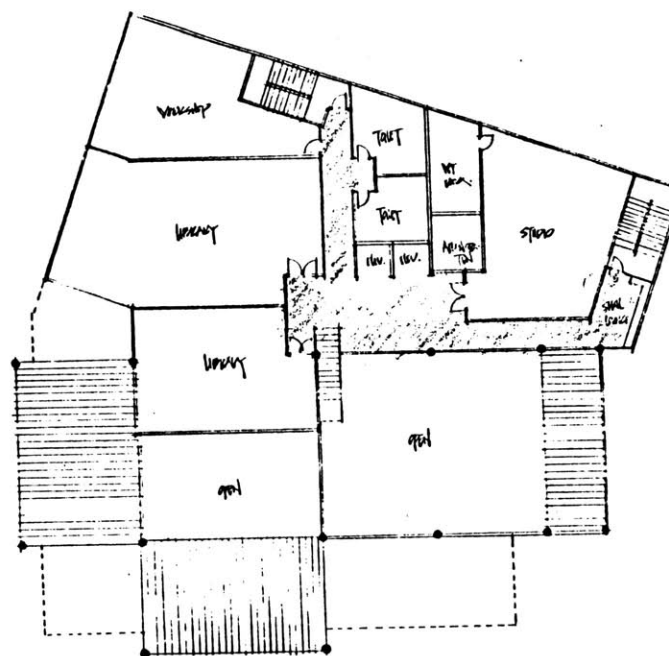


PLANS



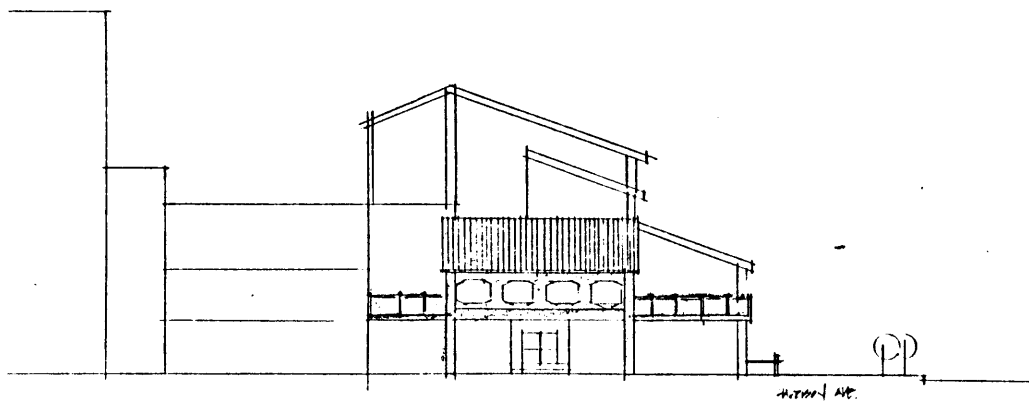
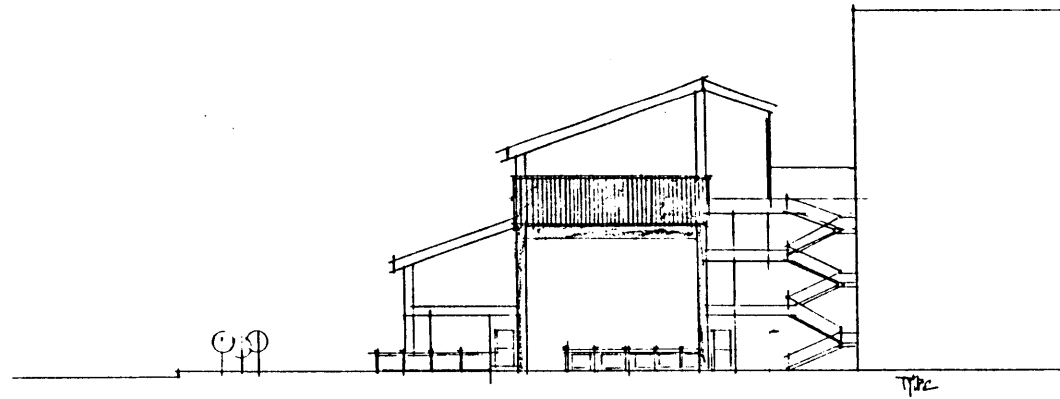
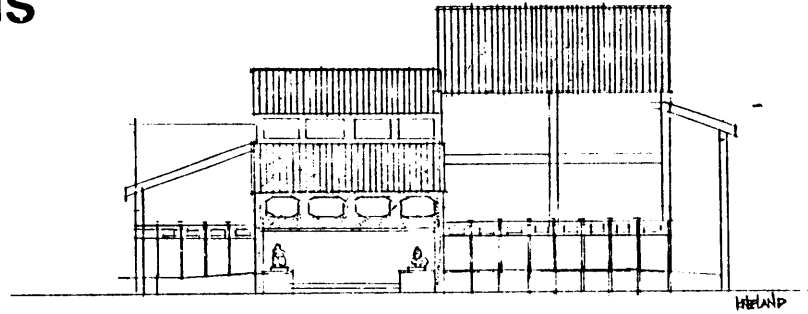


second level

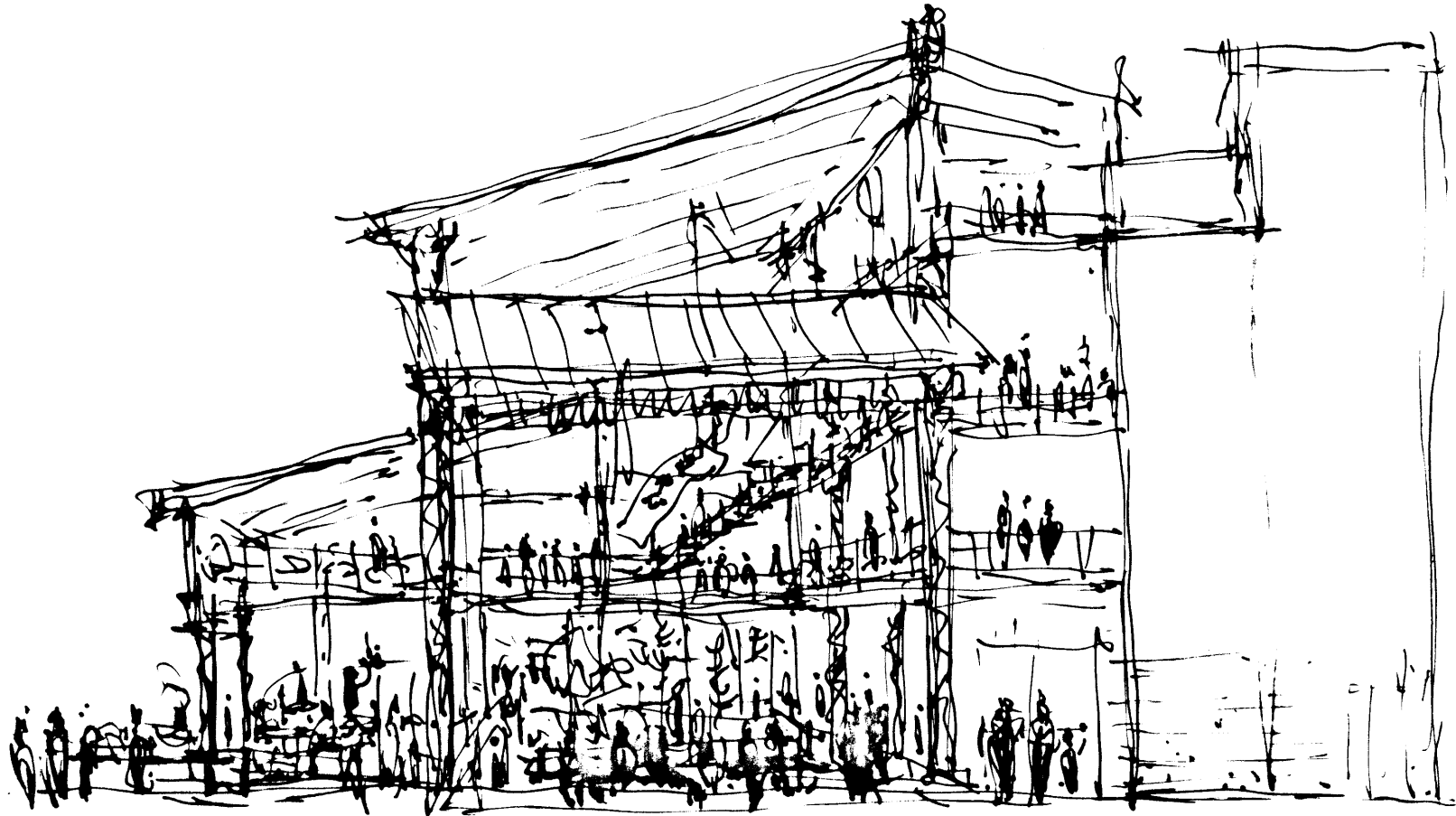


third level

ELEVATIONS



PERSPECTIVE



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